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George Roberts
Interviewer: Zoe Rhine
Tuesday, March 20, 2004 at George Roberts house, 11 Red Oak Road, Lakeview Park, Asheville, NC.

[Before recording, Mr. Roberts showed me a family album, a family genealogy and an album that he had put together during his career with the post office. He mentioned to me that his mother was killed in a car accident in 1921. Addie Robert's obituary was 7/8/1921 (DOD=7/7/1921); she was the daughter of Madison Edwards. Alonzo Robert's obituary was 10/17/1961 (DOD=10/16/1961); he was the son of A.C. Roberts. Their six sons were A. Lee, Ray F., George M., Charles A., Harold and W. Rodney Roberts. See collection for obituaries.]

ZR: Could you say a little background about when you were born, and where, who your parents were, who you married.

GR: I was born March 12, 1911 at 21 Girdwood Street down in the west end of the city. My mother was Addie Edwards Roberts, my father was Alonzo L. Roberts. He was a railroad engineer. I was one of six boys. I went to Park Avenue School, which was right up the street from 21 Girdwood, now a historic neighborhood, you might say of the western part of the city—as having a lot of notoriety. When people refer to West End

and Chicken Hill—I remember Chicken Hill. Those houses were owned by the little cotton mill.

ZR: Was it called Chicken Hill then?

GR: Yes, called Chicken Hill—called Factory Hill. There were two sections there. The officials lived on Girdwood Street. The officials were George Murphy was the head of it; A.H. Nance, and J.B. Grice. Now Grice, later on, was a Baptist minister—a lay minister. And the Logan family, a very prominent family in West Asheville, wanted to build a Baptist church. So they got him to be the minister of Calvary Baptist Church. He stayed there thirty some years. And as the story goes, well he married us in 1944.

ZR: And your wife's maiden name was?

GR: Agnes Rogers Roberts. But Mr. Grice had several daughters. I think two daughters and two sons. But he stayed at Calvary for about thirty years or so, and he lost his wife, she passed away. And I'm told a couple or three years latter, he married one of the members of the congregation, who'd been divorced. And they ran him out of the church. Staying there that long. (Well, this is kind of smutty stuff.) But they built the West Asheville Baptist Church and the Grace Baptist Church—they came out of that church.

ZR: Would you mind saying what you said earlier about Park Avenue and class?

GR: No, well, Park Avenue was one of the better classes then. My father was a railroad engineer, and of course that was close to his work. The old railroad shop was down where the passenger depot was, across the tracks, of course that's not there on Depot Street. But the midwesterners and the northeastern manufacturers came down and started mills, cotton mills and various things. And they built these gorgeous homes, cause they

get this view in the afternoon, unobstructed view of the French Broad River. Only river I know of, or maybe the only second one that flows north.

ZR: Did they have a view of the mountains, too?

GR. Yea, Pisgah. Pisgah and the Rat—you know every body talks about Pisgah and the Rat. Yea, they had a perfect view of Pisgah and the Rat. Some of the people that lived on Park Avenue at that time was Fred Felmet, they ran the Felmet Brother's Grocery; Sam Brice, he ran a market down on the corner of Robert's street and Buxton street.

ZR: So are talking about the turn of the century?

GR: This was in 1911 and that area. And there was the Davis family, ran the Slayden and Fakes, the big wholesale company out in Biltmore. Many prominent people in that section. Earl Eller, that used to be mayor of the city of Asheville, lived up on the corner Milk Street and Patton Avenue—West Haywood, it was at that time. Ah, Sam Brice, I mentioned him, he ran a market down. H.P. May, worked in Biltmore Industries. His son went on to become a dentist, one of them, one of them was John May that run a market in West Asheville.

[1. Frederick , M. Felmet, Felmet Brothers, h. 20 Jefferson Drive, 1915 CD; brothers are Claude L., William V. and Frederick M. Felmet. Felmet Brothers was at 349 W. Haywood St.

2. Samuel P. Bryce, gro. 34 Roberts, h. 13 Park Ave., 1915 CD.

3. Henry P. May overseer Asheville Cotton Mills, h 15 Girdwood, 1915 CD. Children listed as Miss Annie L., D. Ross, Jno. B., and Miss Rita S. May.

4. Earl Eller is listed as a student in 1915 CD and living in household of Thomas N.Eller (foreman) at 391 W. Haywood. Later #375.

5. Charles S. Davis: Slayden, Fakes & Co. wholesale groceries, 29-31 S. Lexington and 351 Depot St., W.J. Slayden pres., Charles S. Davis sec., 1915 CD.]

ZR: What is the last name?

GR: M-A-Y, May's Market in West Asheville. Hugh May was the dentist. Ross May worked on a railroad. My father got him a job on a railroad. My father was a railroad engineer and was with the Southern Railway for fifty-some years. Started at the railroad in 1992 [means 1892]. He was born in 1878, he was 12 years old when he started with the railroad. The Spanish American War came along. He was a call boy. He went in the Spanish American War and he came out. Railroad had nothing for him to do so he started to learn the plumbing trade. They opened up the railroad--it came up from South Carolina. Breaking new ground, and they needed more workers so he got a job as a fire man on the railroad.

ZR: Do you know if he built the house you were born in?

GR: No, he did not. He bought it from a man by the name of Grant who came down here from Chicago. I don't know whether Grant built it or not. But it's an interesting thing, Grant later had the Asheville Baking Company. He owned the baking company at that time on the corner of Ashland Avenue, called Asheville Steam Bakery. And it was located at the corner of Ashland Avenue and Patton Avenue. And he bought that bakery from a fellow, Zindel . . .Zindel's Bakery. Mr. Zindell went down onto Hilliard Avenue, down on the corner of Hilliard Avenue and Clingman Avenue and built another bakery and went into the wholesale bakery business. Had trucks and all of that. They had owned Roger Grant, who had bought the bakery from the initial owner and built the

Asheville Baking Company on Choctow Street, across from St. Joseph's Hospital, where the doctors are in that building now, the one he built. But a lot has taken place along the West End section. It's run down, but it's making some progress now, I think. There's some talk of building houses on what is known as Chicken Hill. And I often wondered how Chicken Hill got it's name, but it's not difficult to see because all the people then had chickens. At 21 Girdwood Street—we had a cow and chickens.

ZR: Really?

GR: We did, we had to have milk. And a garden. It was all fenced in with a board fence. And all the factory workers down there would have a little plot around the factory house and they'd have chickens out there, lay eggs. They didn't have any room for a garden. But I can see those women coming out of the mill, men as well. They worked 12 hour shifts. Six in the morning to six at night, and 12 at night to six in the morning. That whistle would blow—six in the morning, 12:00 for lunch, six in the evening, same thing at midnight. But the women would come out and lint would be four inches deep on top of their heads. Lint from the mill, the textile mill. And they called them "lint-heads". Referred to them as "lint-heads." And H.J. Olive ran a store down by the railroad track there—Smith's Bridge. It was more-or-less a factory store—if you worked in the factories you could buy and charge over there. It was a general store. West End then, if you know down by the Chesterfield Mill—if you know where it's burned down--it was a very thriving community. Department Stores. Polly Mears ran a department store down there. Two barber shops—the first barber ever cut my hair was Preacher Ball. His son, [Enoch Ball] now is a Methodist Minister with the church in the North End. I saw his SSW

son one day at a dental office, and I said my first haircut I got from your daddy. I was about five years old and I had curls down to my shoulders.

ZR: Like Thomas Wolfe.

GR: I guess. My dad came home one day, and mother wasn't there. She had gone to a GIA meeting, as I remember. He took me down and sheared all that wool off. But he saved the curls. Cause he knew he was gonna get in the hall? pretty good to account to her. She came back and sure enough she got on his case. But in 1918 we moved out near the Bingham School. You know where Square D. plant is? Well that was Bingham property. Where the Square D. plant is, that was the old Bingham ball field. Bingham School was an old military school that moved out to Asheville from Mebane, N.C. Bingham was an old family. One of them operates a newspaper over in Louisville, Kentucky. Barry Bingham. So dad bought 41 acres over on what is now North Louisiana Avenue. And the property backed up to Emma School, and over to the brickyard road over on the west. It had been a brick mill.

ZR: On the property?

GR: On the property. He bought it at a courthouse sale. And we moved over there. Six, five boys I guess were living there then. We moved over in 1921. And, no we moved over in 1918, permanently. We moved over the year before and stayed there the summer and moved over in 1918. In 1916 we had a big flood in Asheville. We were living on Girdwood Street at that time.

ZR: So you saw it all from right there.

GR: And my mother took my two brothers, Lee and Roy, and myself and I believe four boys, course she had a baby in her arms, and we stood in front of Westmoreland's store

[Benjamin Westmorland], on West Haywood Street, and watched the French Broad River take the Smith Bridge away.

ZR: You saw that!

GR: I saw that thing go to hell. Now the railroad trestle withstood all the flood—it never washed away. And the railroad trestle was not too old. By the way, my father ran the first locomotive across that trestle. My uncle was the conductor. Charlie Robinson was the conductor, as I'm told, was the conductor on that. But we moved out there in that section. . .

ZR: So you watched houses and everything going down that river.

GR: Oh yea, the river took everything. The water was five or six feet deep around the depot section.

ZR: We have photographs of it, but it would be hard to imagine otherwise, as the damage was so great.

GR: Well, interesting thing, people say well, Lake Toxaway, south of here in Transylvania County. The damn washed away. Everybody said, "if it hadn't been for that damn washing away and that water coming down the French Broad River, we never would have had this flood." But the water doesn't flow this way from Lake Toxaway—it flows south. Into South Carolina. So it wouldn't have had anything to do with it.

ZR: So that damn broke before it got here?

GR: During the '16. Yea, it was district wide.

ZR: Can I back you up a minute? You mentioned all the business down in the depot area. Was that something that the mill workers went to, as well as the more upper class?

GR: Not necessarily. You know where the Dave Steel Company is on Clingman Avenue? Well all that section down through there—Roberts Street and Depot Street from the cotton mill all the way to Biltmore Avenue, as up Depot Street, up Clingman Avenue—was all businesses. Manufacturing businesses, mill works, or trade stores, or coal companies, or Sands and Company was a store for the railroad. S. Sternberg ran a place down there ["S. Sternberg & Co., junk, 353-359 Depot St." (1920 cd); hides and steel at 353-361 1928 cd]—they bought hides and junk. Ned Wheeler had a brokerage house there ["Ned Wheeler Brokerage Co., 361 Depot St" (1928 cd)]. Ah, Swift and Sternberg ran a place down there ["Swift & Co., provisions, 365 Depot St., " (1920 cd) and at 131 Roberts St. in 1928 cd] was there. Armour Company ["Armour & Co., provisions, 375 Depot St.," (1920 cd)] was there. Coming on up Depot Street--Southern States Bank ["Southern State Bank, 423 Depot St. with R.E. Currence pres., S. Sternberg v-pres.," in 1920 cd but not at that location in 1928], then when you turn on up Southside Avenue was J. A. Grove Grocery [Jno. A. Grove wholesale grocery at 362 Southside Ave. (1920 cd.) And at the corner of South French Broad and Southside was a funeral home. And there was an R.C. Bottling Company, and just right on up. The streetcar ran that way.

ZR: So it was full and active. And I guess with the trains coming in there would have been all that—

GR: It was full and active. Yea there was a train coming in—well when I went with the post office in 1936, there was about 18 passenger trains coming in and out of Asheville every day.

ZR: And then you had also said, besides Park Avenue, was a place of early higher class development, there was also—

GR: Well as it developed, and more people came here and wanted to make Asheville their homes, yea. It was advertised as a health resort, mainly for tuberculosis. E.W. Grove was sent here because they thought it would be beneficial to him—though he had hiccups. It never cured the hiccups, but that's what brought him here in 1905. But Montford Avenue, was a little better section.

ZR: But before that, you were saying Park Avenue and South French Broad and. . .

GR: South French Broad and Biltmore Avenue—South Main it was called.

ZR: Anyway, you thought those were early developments of high class neighborhoods.

GR: Yea, until Grove came along, and then after that there was Grove Park Inn, I mean the Grove Park section and that was developed by Grove. And the streets in the Grove Park section, a lot of them were named for E.W. Grove's children. Of Course that little park off of Charlotte Street had E.W. Grove's office. And as a messenger boy for the Western Union in 1923.

ZR: You were?

GR: Yes, that was my first job. And that was the same year that Cornelius Vanderbilt married Cecil. But I remember many times, we went out there to E.W. Grove's home, which was on the corner of North Liberty and Broad Street, where the Jewish temple is now.

ZR: So it was raised? We were hunting for where it was the other day.

GR: That's it. It's no longer there.

ZR: Did he build that house, do you know?

GR: Far as I know. Far as I know he did.

ZR: You'd think that would have gotten saved.

GR: But that was another nice section.

ZR: Yea, it's just hard for me to think of central Asheville, the South French Broad area, and Park Avenue—because it's so opposite now—of it being the main upper class neighborhoods.

GR: What my father used to tell me about Asheville, he says, when Asheville was supposed to be first surveyed as a town, two surveyors came in here, and there was—I'm not sure if it was John O'Donnell or not, but on the corner of Lexington Avenue, which was Water Street at that time, and there was a saloon. And these two surveyors went over and got them a bottle. Now where the BB&T is now, the BB& T building—the Northwestern Bank building it used to be—there were springs. So they'd go over and sit down beside the springs and started nipping and drinking on the thing. And the center of Asheville was supposed to be West Asheville.

ZR: The center of Asheville was supposed to be in West Asheville?

GR: Yep. You take Haywood Road, you look at the topography, how level it is out there. That was supposed to be the main street. But they said, "Hell, this is as good a place as any." And they'd take another drink. There was, at one time, in front of the BB& T building in the sidewalk, a brass peg in the sidewalk, put down there by the Geodatic Survey to give the altitude and all, and that was the center of the square.

ZR: And there was a spring there?

GR: Spring was—when they put—this was in 1973, when they put an addition on that building, I had retired from the post office and was working for the North Western Bank,

and the water still runs out of that spring. And the stream that goes down Broadway beside UNCA, that's where it emanates. In those years, I could remember when there were five livery stables on North Lexington Avenue and on South Lexington Avenue—Chambers & Weavers on the corner of Aston Street and South Lexington.

ZR: Let me ask one more thing for the record. You had mentioned earlier that the house you grew up in was three stories and it was made with. . . .

GR: Well, it was a frame house, 3-stories. It sat on a lot that was all fenced in. Had a garden, had a stable right there for the cow. We didn't have any pigs—we had pigs later, out in the country. But, ah, whoever built that house really knew how to built it. It had a lot of this gingerbread trim on the outside. And it had three stories. Down stairs was a kitchen, dining room, a great big room that you could put 20 tons of coal in, because we didn't have central heating. It had two or three stoves in it. Then up on the second floor, we had the living room, and a sitting room and a bedroom. And on the third floor, there were two bedrooms and a library. One bathroom—that was on the third floor.

ZR: Oh really?

GR: If you had to go, you had to go out on the back porch. [Laughter.] But it had the most gorgeous trim in it. The steps were walnut, the trim was cherry. And it had a big porch on the front and around the side. The lot was fenced in out the front. Preacher Grice lived across the street over there. And George Murphy lived across the street. A funny thing, my brother Charles--who was two years my junior—was eating bread and jelly sandwiches. And he'd go out to the fence out there. And a little girl would come across the street. And he'd say, "Nellie, Nellie, you want some bread and jelly." In later years, I was in Charlotte, traveling for a pharmaceutical firm, this was 1945. I was

coming down the Johnston Building elevator in Charlotte. And this young lady was on the elevator and I looked at her and I said, "You look like one of J. B. Grice's children." She says, "I am." I says, "Which one?" And she says—no that's not the way I said it. I said, "Nellie, Nellie, you want some jelly?" She said, "You're not Charles Roberts are you?" I said, "No, that's by brother." I said, "Where do you live?" She said, "I live in Munroe, N.C. and my husband is a railway mail clerk. Well that's strange, a small world. Oh, they were all beautiful girls. They had black eyes and black hair. And the two boys, Worth and Earl, Earl left here and went to Virginia—Newport News or Norfolk, somewhere. I don't know where Worth went to—he was kind of the black sheep of the family. But, getting back to the sections, as they move around Asheville, the Montford section then the Grove Park section developed. Grove came here in 1905 and bought 600 acres of land from a professor from the University of North Carolina, that ran from 800 acres I believe, that ran from Kimberly Avenue to Sunset Mountain, top of Sunset Mountain. And there's two houses now, 39 and 41 Edgewood Road, that were moved off of Kimberly Avenue to Edgewood Road. The original houses. And the Kimberly family, of course, built a big rock house on Edgewood Road. Ms. Carter, who was a Kimberly, just died here over at the Baptist Home, last year or so [2003], 100 years old, or there about.

ZR: And still hiking.

GR: And still giving physical culture lectures (?). My wife took a course over there, to exercise or something, and my wife said, "I can't keep up that old gal, and she was 85 years old then. But she had a group over there every week at the library, on Merrimon Avenue. But that section came on and developed, and a lot of those homes were built by

Grove. And then on up Grove bought the Grovestone plant over there in Swannanoa. And there three river rock houses, I think. Two I know of [at Lomberly Avenue and Griffing Boulevard.]

ZR: In Grovemont, or out here? [Grovemont is a residential section at Swannanoa, NC.]

GR: On Kimberly, off of Kimberly. The corner of Kimberly Avenue and Griffin Boulevard, there's a rock house. Built by the stone from Grovestone—river rock. Then on Warwick Place just before you get there on the left off of Kimberly, is also one. Then there's some in Grovemont. That's another development he developed. It was supposed to be a modern development. But he died before he got that finished. But then from the Grove Park section, in 1922 Judge Murphy and Fred Sales and a few other incorporators, closed down the Weaverville Railroad. The railroad that used to run from Weaverville to Merrimon Avenue [and incorporated Lakeview Park]. Where the Java Colby house is now, there was a depot along about that section. And it ran right down the center of the lake, the present lake, to Weaverville. And the old road bed was to the left of the old Weaverville Highway out there. You can see where the railway went along. And they closed that. And a few years ago, three or four years ago, the Lakeview Park commission had to pump out that lake. And they had these engineers piling all this stuff over on the corner of Merrimon Avenue. And we had a meeting over at the Presbyterian Church over here—the Lakeview Park commission. And the gentleman in charge of that project, spoke up over there and said, "I've never seen so many damn little rocks in my life. Said looks like there must have been a lot of Indians around here. Looks like these things they would have used in a tomahawk or something, you know. All the same size." I said, "That's not hard to explain." He said, "Well, tell me about it then." I said, "The railroad

went down through there. That's the ballast between those railroad ties, you know all these rocks are about the same size." He said, "Well I'm glad you told me cause that was running me crazy."

ZR: Are the ties still down there?

GR: I presume they are, cause the old bridge is still down there. Merrimon Avenue only went out to just beyond Midland Drive. And then crossed through the lake and crossed over onto Lakeshore Drive on this side. And that was called old, the name escapes me now, the road to Burnsville—old Burnsville Hill Road. It's on the map in there, is old Burnsville Hill Road. It came across there. And see that development started in 1922. And then in the 20's, '26 or'27, they had a swimming pool. And the city had a drought, they were short of water. And they took the fire trucks down there, and pumped the water out of the swimming pool into the mains to keep the pressure up. In later years, someone got drowned in that swimming pool, I've been told, I don' remember it. And they knocked the wall out of it, because of the liability involved. The old home over there, on Lakeview Road. Well off of Lakeshore Drive, you know, Lakeview Drive goes around and comes into Glen Falls Road. The last, next to the last house on the right, going around that way, is the old Tea Room. They used to have tea in it. When they were selling the lots for Lakeview Park, they'd bring the prospects over there, and give them some tea, or whatever they'd give them. They'd entertain them, lets put it that way. But in the 30's, 1930, they still had their own policemen out there, riding their motorcycles. Mr. Karl Connely was the policeman out there, and he rode his motorcycle through there at night.

ZR: Where are you talking about now, Grove Park or Lakeview Park?

GR: Lakeview Park. He was the motorcycle officer over there. And I was at that time working in Norwood Park Pharmacy at 500 Merrimon Avenue. And of course streetcars ran down there, ran out to Ottari Road, yea, just about to Ottarri Road, where Citizen's Hardware is now. Down there at the car line. But this line that came in from Weaverville, they had put a coal car, or some kind of car, a freight car on that downtown streetcar. And they'd pull it up to Broadway and unload. T.S. Morrison's was on Broadway at that time. That's the oldest business in Asheville now. But, unload farm equipment right out of that car, and take it down and hook it up to the Southern Railway down there.

ZR: Did you mention earlier that you had worked at the drug store on Montford?

GR: Yea, 25 Montford.

ZR: Is that where the Laundromat was then, later?

GR: Two doors down from the Laundromat.

[Their dog comes into the room.]

ZR: You don't have any photographs of that building do you? They're trying to put it on, Peggy Seiger was working on it?

GR: No, I don't. I worked at Mullen's Pharmacy.

ZR: Do you know who owned it?

GR: L.B. Mullen. He bought the building while I worked there. Because, there's a story behind that. Well, Mullen had been two doors down, further down, on Montford Avenue. And I think there's a new building there now, a candy shop or something there now. Sweet shop, or something. But he had been down there and he went broke when the banks went broke. So he moved up the street and rented this building, which had been

Burleson's Grocery, prior to that time. And he rented that building, and I went over there to work for him in 1934. Well, in '35, this is the WPA days. My brother was a doctor, and I learned pharmacy. We started in on the apprentice system on Merrimon Avenue. So I'd go over there and work.

ZR: As a pharmacist?

GR: As a pharmacist. You could be that up until 1937. You'd come up under the apprentice system. In '37 they cut it out. But I was in the Post Office [can't hear a few words] because when I left the Post Office in 1936, I was working 92 hours a week for $22 for the drug store. And I had visions of going down to the Post Office for 40 hours a week at .65 an hour. But the first two weeks I was at the Post Office. . .

ZR: And when did you start at the Post Office?

GR: 1936, October. First two weeks, I drew $15.80. I didn't realize that I could go down there and work me 15 minutes and swing me out for two hours. And I had literally been there from 1:00 in the morning till 8:00 at night and not get paid for eight hours. But my boss told me, Dr. Mullen, "Anytime they swing you out, come over here and work for me." But the WPA came along, and Dr. B.E. Morgan and my brother would come by there about 9:00 every night and leave about 35--40 prescriptions. And we'd fill those things. So Mullen was paying $100 a month rent on it. And Roy Booth. Was in the real estate business and he came over here one day, and said, "Doc—Roy had been in the pharmacist himself—why don't you buy this building? Doc said, "I couldn't pay for this building." "Why you can pay for this building." Says, "You're paying a hundred dollars a month rent You could get it and not any pay more than that on payments." He said, "Na." You know he got burnt going broke. I said, "Doc, I believe I'd buy this

building." Well he bought that building and we paid it off in ten months. Ten months. He didn't owe a dime on it. And he had three or four rooms he rented upstairs. Cold water flats, you might say, furnished heat and the water and that's all.

ZR: Did you keep working there?

GR: I worked there until the '40s. I'd relieve him, he'd open up and I'd relieve him.

ZR: So you retired from the Post Office?

GR: In May, 1973. I was retired ten days and went to work for the Northwestern Bank in Asheville.

ZR: That doesn't surprise me. What position did you retire from in the Post Office?

GR: I was customer services representative. This was a new job.

ZR: Did you work in the downtown, old Post Office Building?

GR: Yea, downtown. And I love to tell that I was the man who would go out and tell 'em to put the dog up after it had bit the postman. But I actually handled all the complaints for the Post Office from Marion to Murphy. If they had a complaint and sent it to Atlanta region, I got it. I introduced zip codes, which was no easy task. And, ah, people didn't want any more numbers—five more numbers.

ZR: You had to be the PR man to talk them into it?

GR: PR man and the interesting thing Zoe, the first group I spoke to was the National Secretaries Association. They were meeting at a convention in the Battery Park Hotel. And the Post Master called me—I'd just been appointed to this job on a Friday night, and says I'm supposed to speak to that group in the morning. He says, "I can't talk, you gonna have to talk to them." [Said in a whisper.] Well, I go up there the next morning and saw that group of ladies in there, and thought what am I going to talk to them about?

I don't know anything about what the postmaster had in mind. So, I thought, I'll just talk to them about the Post Office. I know more about the Post Office than they do. So that's what I talked about. And I got the nicest letter from them. And I've got these letters. [Mr. Roberts pulls out his notebook of letters he has saved.] But I says to the head of it, I wish you'd do me a favor. I wish you'd formulate 25 questions, that I can ask school groups, business groups, cause I'd put on a lot of programs to schools and business groups--so I can get some feedback. You can talk to a high school group and you can talk all you want to and you'd ask if there were any questions, and you can't get one of them to raise a hand. But I'd go to A-B Tech., every year, talk to their business group out there and I'd hand out these 25 questions. And I'd say, now we're going to have an examination on this when we're through. And they'd look at each other, but I'd say, I'm not going to take the paper up. Now you can give them those questions and they'll keep you on your feet for two hours, because they're not embarrassed to ask you a question. But the only place I'd ever been to that that didn't work was the St. Genevieve of the Pines. I went out there, I handed them out and I didn't get a single reply. The nun wrote me the cutest letter and she said, "You get about the same response I get out of the girls." And that just blowed me up. But I'd go—I'd handle complaints from the Atlanta region. A little later on, they called five of us to Atlanta. Mr. Louis Shields was head of the office in Atlanta. And I said, "Mr. Shields, what are we down here for?" He said, "Well we're going to put on some programs—we're going to put on some seminars in North, South Carolina and Georgia." And he says, "You're going to take North Carolina, parts of it, and you're going to take Rock Hill, S.C. and Dalton, Georgia". That's the way he had it broke up. And I said, "What material we going to use." He said just whatever you

fellows come up with. So they put five of us in a room for three days, and we came up with 64 pages of material. They Xeroxed it and sent it off to us, 64 pages and I had them stapled together. Well, I had seen an overhead projector somewhere's in my life—over at the First Union Bank—but I'd never used one. We didn't have a dime in our budget for anything like that at the Post Office—a brand new program. So I went over there and I said, "Mr. Glenn." Mr. Glenn was the head of the First Union Bank. I said, "Mr. Glenn, you got an overhead projector over here." And I told him my situation. I said, "We don't have any money." And he called his secretary over and said, "Do we have an overhead projector?' She said, Yea, we got one." He said, "Where is it?" "Back there in the vault." He said, "What's it look like." She said, "Looks like that briefcase back there." He says, "Have we ever used it?" She says, "No, we've never used it." "How long we had it?" "Oh, many a years." He said, "Let him have it." He didn't know he had it, so he said you take it and use it. Well, I didn't know what I needed, but you have to have transparencies. So I went to shopping around, and I went down Biltmore to Mrs. Mitchell down there, that worked for the 3M place down there. And I said, "Mrs. Mitchell can you make a transparency. She said yes sir and I said what do you get for them. She said, "We get $3.00 a piece for them. How many do you need?" I said I need 64, 64 of those things. I said I don't have any money. I don't have a dime. She said, "If you don't tell anybody I'll make them for you." So, she made those things for me and Iused them, and I got the nicest letter from the Atlanta region. So I'd go around and I'd explain the mailing process to businesses. If they had a problem, I'd work with them. Anything from a little old lady that says I don't hear from my daughter every week and she tells me she writes me. You'd be surprised. I put out a form letter I could use in

cases like that. So, I'd go back and I'd send this letter to Mary Jane and I'd say your mother thinks something's wrong with the mail service. If you'd do me a favor and mail these two cards that I've enclosed. Indicate the day of the week and the place that you mail these cards, I want to check the mail service from your city to our city. And I'd hear back from the daughter. "I haven't been writing Momma like I should." I'd wait about 30 days, and I would call up Mrs. Gilmers and I'd say, "How's your mail?" Mr. Roberts I'm getting a letter every week. I don't know what got into my daughter." I said I'm so glad to hear that and that's the way it goes. You got a use a little psychology.

But the biggest trick that was ever pulled on me. I'd zip code your cards if you had a mailing list. And I zip coded all the cards of the major businesses in Asheville. But I was out at Lake Junaluska and the head of the World Council of Churches out there, had made a complaint to the Atlanta Region about his mail service. So I called up out there and I said to the secretary, "Your boss has made a complaint to the Atlanta region and I'd like to know when I can come out and talk to him about it." She said, "Let me see." She said, "Dr.—" whatever his name was "Come out on Monday, 10:00. I said, "I'll be there." So, I go out on Monday at 10:00 and he's not there. He's gone to Franklin. I said, "Mrs. Smathers, I thought you said 10:00." She said she did but he had to go out to Franklin. And I started talking with her about it. She said "I don't want you to feel like he's picking on the Post Office. Says, he picks on everybody. He complains to the telephone company. He complains to anybody. Power bill too high. He complained to the Ford Motor Company so much that they gave him a new car, for one that 50,000 miles on it. I said, "What kind of mail was he complaining about?" "All the junk mail we get." I said, "Mrs. Smathers, we don't have a mail called "junk mail." We have first

class, second class, third class and fourth class." I said, "Show me what you're talking about." So she reached down in the trash can and she pulled out fifteen envelopes and all of them were non-profit except one. One was from this outfit, if you buy a new car they'll send you a letter to buy seat covers. I forget the name of that now, but anyhow, just one business, just one exception. I said, "Mrs. Smathers, if we cut out all this junk mail, we got to do away with these fourteen pieces down here. It's all non-profit—it's all church mail. "Oh, he wouldn't favor that." Tuttle, Dr. Tuttel. "Dr. Tuttle wouldn't be in favor of that." I said, "Well it's all classed. I said, "This piece right here, that comes from the seat cover people, that's the only one we make anything on, we don't make anything on this nonprofit stuff. "Well, he wouldn't be in favor of that." I said, "Well, you tell him I've been out here, and if he's not happy with what I told you, set a definite time and I'll come by and talk to him. She said, "By the way, while you're out here, if you don't mind, go by here, they're getting ready to mail out this publication and they're having a little trouble mailing." I said, "I've got that on my list because Mr. Medford, the Post master down here at Lake Junalaska had mentioned it to me at the Post Office and I told him I'd stop by while I was out there. So I went in down there, and the lady says, "Oh, the man from the Post Office—you came by to help us get out this mailing." I said, "Nooo, I come here to tell you how you can get it out." And I started to say how it has to be in zip code sequence, if there's five o more pieces, they have to be separated, and this that and the other and went down the rigamarole. "Mr. Roberts, we could never do that." I said, "I'll tell you what you do—you have an address wrap machine?" "Yes." "You run out a 3 x 5 card, send them to me. I'll set them up in zip code sequence and send them back to you." "You'll do that?" "Yea."

I got 55,000 pieces. I think that's right. I don't want to exaggerate. But anyway, it took about two months, course what I'd have to do, if I had more that three or four pieces out of town, I'd have to send them to that post office and they'd put them in sequence and send them back to me. Then I could return 'em to them. But after that, the Pitney-Bowes' man stuck his head in my office door one day, and he said, "Mr. Roberts, you ever been out to Lake Junaluska? They've got the nicest mailing system set up out there. He'd just sold them some equipment, you see. He said, "You oughta go out there and look at that." I said, "Let me tell you something. I don't need to look at that. I know what you're talking about." He said, "Did you have anything to do with that?" I said, "Did I have anything to do with it."

Well there's another example of helping people with their mailing. The Asheville newspaper was always giving the postman a hard time. Luther Thigpen, I remember him. He was an editor over there. And he'd always write something we'd done wrong.

ZR: Oh, in the paper?"

GR: Yea, and I said, " Mr. Thigpen, why don't you write something nice about us sometime?" "Well, if you ever do anything nice, I'll write something nice about you." "I said, "Call Doug Pearson in here." He was the circulation manager. He said, "What'd you do?" I said, "I took you galley list--last year you had a hundred complaints from the state of Florida, about your newspaper." And, of course ??. He called Doug in there. Is said, "I set your galley list up in zip code sequence like it [used to be and you haven't had a single complaint since. Mr. Thigpen had a few kind words for the Post Office I a later article.] [Some missed in turning tape which Mr. Roberts supplied later.]

[End of side one.]

ZR: He didn't overdue it, did he?

GR: No, but they operated a radio station at that time. So I got in with the man in the radio station one week from open zip code then, and I went up and talked to him one day, and I says, "You have people call in, and you ask them there zip code and if they can tell you the right zip code, give them a little something." Well, they'd do that. And it worked out. I want to show you something again. You can cut the machine off. [Mr. Roberts showed me letters of thanks that he had received.

ZR: Remember, I told you I brought some photographs. This is one of Hugh Brown. I'm not sure how old he was there. That's the only portrait that I know of him.

GR: Well, the only thing I can remember about his business, he was in the business on Walnut Street in the Tyler Building.

ZR: You mean The Treasure Chest?

GR: The Treasure Chest. Yes.

ZR: Did you say you remember the Brown Hardware store?

GR: I remember in on Broadway. Yea, 25 Broadway I believe, right there. But uh, I had no reason to be around the Browns. But I remember The Treasure Chest was in the middle section of the Tyler Building.

ZR: I don't know if you went in there much, but do you remember it as an antiques store, or china, or mountain handcrafts.

GR: They had the whole works. I don't remember when he started.

ZR: When he first started The Treasure Chest, it was evidently. . .

GR: In the twenties.

ZR: It was December, '24. And what he did was, at the back of the hardware store, there was an alley, I think it was called Tingle's Alley, that runs behind the back of his building. . .

GR: Yes, Tingle's Alley, that's right.

ZR: And then you get to the back of the buildings that face Lexington. I think the alley used to be covered—somebody told me that it was—for deliveries.

GR: I can't ever remember it being covered, but I know that.

ZR: Well, they said, he built a walkway that went from the back of his store that went across the alley to the top floor of the building that faced Lexington, that was one of his warehouses. He had three floors of a warehouse there. So on that top floor, was where he first had The Treasure Chest. And it would have been for a couple years—sort of as a gift shop to his hardware store.

GR: Yea, I would have been too young to remember that.

ZR: Yes, I think I figured out you were eleven.

GR: Yes, I was born in 1911, so I would have been fifteen years old.

ZR: Talk about the photograph of the fireplace in The Treasure Chest.]

GR: Now in 1924, the Charmil Hotel was down on that corner. The Charmil Hotel had offices up above there and the Chamber of Commerce was up there for a while. And they used it one time for the temporary quarters for the City of Asheville when they were building a new city hall. I remember that because I delivered telegrams

ZR: I'm trying to remember the name of the man who owned that hotel.

GR: Millard, C.C. Millard. He had post office box 1.

ZR: He was one of the first people in 1911, when it became the Brown Book Store [meant Brown Hardware], he and J.G. Stikeleather. . .

GR: I knew Stikeleather.

ZR: F.M. Miller, Frank M.

GR: He had a printing company.

ZR: No, I think he had a coal business. No, not Miller. . . Was it Miller? They were all older businessmen and they helped him buy the stock. And many of them were on the board of directors. including this Miller guy, was President of Brown Hardware most of the time. I think I have his name wrong. Weaver. It was Frank M. Weaver.

GR: I didn't know him. Weaver seems to me, like they were in the, I want to say engineering business or something of that kind. Maybe it was the Asheville Paving Company. You could look in the city directories.

ZR: Well, do you remember Hugh Brown at all? I'm having trouble writing about somebody I never knew. Do you have any sense of his personality—if he was shy or outgoing, proper or. . .?

GR: Well, I would judge him as being like Mary Ida. I would say he was a vivacious sort of person. And he must have had a pretty good type of personality to develop this type of business, because that's not something that the ordinary person would go into.

ZR: Right, I think of Mary Ida as a saint.

GR: She is, she is. And a little devil, too.

ZR: I have a little picture of his wife Lelia Brown. She was pretty young too. Mitchell, she was a Mitchell. Mitchell was a prominent name in politics around here. There was a

Sheriff Mitchell for years. Nobody could beat him. This is a early photograph of the Brown Hardware store, before your time, but I thought you'd enjoy seeing it.

GR: Frank Roberson's father worked there. Have you talked to him?

ZR: Yes, I had a nice long talk with him.

GR: Did he remember?

ZR: Yes, he didn't remember much of the Treasure Chest. He mostly knew the hardware stuff. I was going to ask you, if you did hardware shopping, but did the various hardware stores specialize in different things?

GR: All of them were just general hardware.

ZR: Really, it just seems that there were a lot. There was the Ottis Green, the T. S. Morrison, the Northup.

GR: The Northup/McDuffie on Patton Avenue.

ZR: I guess there was just that much trade.

GR: Had a lot of trade. A lot of trade. [Mr. Roberts is looking at the photograph of the interior of Brown Hardware.] Look you got everything from hand irons to horseshoes. A lot of coal stove in there. What is that over here? Fire screens. Looks like stoves back through there.

ZR: I was also going to ask you if you know the name R.A. Long? An older man. He worked for him for many years.

GR: The only hardware man I ever knew well, was a fellow worked for Ottis Green and I can't think of his name now. His name was Ollie Slack. Ottis Green had two places. He had one on Walnut Street and one up on Pack Square.

ZR: Oh, he had one on Walnut, too?

GR: Yea, corner of Carolina Lane and Walnut. But there were a bunch of hardware store. One or two out in West Asheville, too. Brown may have had one out in West Asheville.

ZR: Yea, he did. He had West Asheville Hardware. I was going to ask you if you remembered it.

GR: I remember that hardware store. It was next to Westwood Street in West Asheville.

ZR: Really, I've been trying to find it and not having much luck.

GR: Well, you know where the old bank building was out there on the left hand side? On Richmond Avenue? Right across is a filling station—two doors South of the filling station.

ZR: South? Away from Patton Avenue?

GR: Uh, well South would be down towards Beverly Road. You go down Haywood Road and Richmond Avenue goes this way. Westwood Place goes down this way. Along about right here, because this little street cuts through right here, goes into Waynesville Avenue. You know where Waynesville Avenue is?

ZR: Is it true that Waynesville Avenue used to go down, used to be Haywood Road that went down to the river?

GR: No. Not to my knowledge. It always ended down there at the foot of the hill.

ZR: So, where were you thinking he was?

GR: Right along here. There was a street over here and there was a tin shop in here later on. But Woody Brothers had a bakery in here. And there was a hardware store right along here. And then there was another hardware store out there in West Asheville, was

on the other side of Haywood Road, much later. Bud Austin's right here. And here was B&B Pharmacy.

ZR: I'll ride down there and see if I can find it. I took Eleanor but she didn't remember it.

GR: Well, West Asheville didn't become part of the city until 1917. Before that time, the honey wagon run out there. You know what the honey wagon?

ZR: No.

GR: They had outhouses. And the honey wagon went out there every day and collected from the outhouses. And the old gentleman that drove that honey wagon had a white mustache [and a white horse. I can see him today. And he'd come down Waynesville Avenue, to Craven Street, and down Craven Street out to the railroad trestle. And back that wagon up beside the railroad trestle and he'd head the white horse South, and sit down and eat his lunch, shoo the flies away and that honey just roll'in out into the river. I believe the guys name was Brackett. I want to say the guys name was Brackett.

ZR: That drove the wagon?

GR: Yea. But half the houses in West Asheville had out houses. Now there was a fella who built a hotel—George Carrier--out around the Asheville School. You familiar with that?

ZR: Sulphur Springs?

GR: Yea. Where Sulphur Springs is. He owned the left hand side of Haywood Road. He developed a lot of that. And there was a covenant, he and the Logan family that owned some property over there—there was a covenant in the deed that said you couldn't let black people live left of the Haywood Road.

ZR: You couldn't let blacks live where?

GR: Left of the Haywood Road. Going out Haywood Road. See where you live, no blacks could live on that side of Haywood Road. All of them were right around Buffalo Street and Burton Street. Burton Street was a lot of whites then, but blacks owned the lower end of it. But ah, in 1921 my mother got killed, Burton Street, which was Buffalo Street then, were not paved streets. Half of the streets in West Asheville, few of the streets were paved. Most of them were cinders. And cinders come from Asheville Gas Company. They'd spread them on the streets there. Hudson Street [then named Electric Street] off of State's Street in West Asheville. I was delivering a telegram one night on Hudson Street on my bicycle. And turned down on Electric Street, and man I was going like a house on fire. And there was a man hole right in the middle of the street, up about this high, and the bicycle hit it right, and I went over the handle bar and

ZR: Cinders up the elbows?

GR: Cinders up the elbows. It tore my bike up. I went ahead and delivered the telegram and carried my bike back up to Haywood Road. And a streetcar came along, and motorman saw me and he helped me load the bike up. I said I don't have a nickel to pay the fare. "Ah get on in here kid." 9 or 10:00 at night.

ZR: Do you remember Allanstand?

GR: Yea, up on Government Street?

ZR: Yes, Francis Goodrich had it. I'm concentrating a little bit on mountain handicrafts, because that's one thing he did nationally, was sold through the Treasure Chest, mountain handicrafts. See, there's been a lot written about Allanstand and the Spinning Wheel—which was out here initially—Clementine Douglas's log cabin, and then later she moved

out on Hendersonville Road. But there's been a lot written about both of them and nothing has ever been written about Hugh Brown selling mountain handcrafts, and probably sold on a lot bigger amounts even than—Clementine Douglas tried to take the national market, but I don't know how Hugh Brown disappeared. Other than that he died early and that he lost the Treasure Chest in the depression.

GR: And that was in the 30's?

ZR: 1931, November 31.

GR: See the banks closed in November, 1929. And in 30, when the Central Bank closed, that took everything in Asheville. There was only two banks stayed open in Asheville—Wachovia and Southern State. Southern State was a little—

ZR: You mentioned that early. I haven't heard of it.

GR: It was a little bank down by the depot. Railroad people, and I understand that Wachovia funneled them their money. And both of the banks got their money from R.J. Reynolds in Winston-Salem. They was funneling them their money—that's where the money came from.

ZR: I think if I figured right you were about 20 in 1931 when that hit. Does that sound about right?

GR: Yea.

ZR: You weren't married then?

GR: I married in '30.

ZR: Can you tell me anything about what your life was like for you or your family in that time period between 29 and 30-31.

GR: It was tough. Well in the period 30-32-33 along in there I went to work for Norwood Park Pharmacy down in 1930 and was working there when I married the first time. And in '32 there was a place over there, the law building across from the courthouse that had a proprietary pharmacy—they didn't have prescriptions. So, patent medicine, things like that and it had a lunch counter in with it. So boss says--I was kind of interested in it--you go up there and buy that if you want to and says, I've got some furniture you can put in it, some show cases. He had a whole basement of that kind of stuff. Course he had had a business up on the Square and he went broke and he moved out on 500 Merrimon Avenue and he had all this stuff, beautiful. So I took the stuff and moved up there. Well, I couldn't get any money to finance it with. I made a big mistake and started crediting the fellows that work in the courthouse and they wouldn't pay their bills. So I stayed over there about a year and I had to close the place up. So I went to work then for a bonding company, making criminal court bonds. Out at the sheriff's department, the police department and I'd also work for Ross Federal Services, and Check Theaters. I'd work to Check Theaters, do you know what I'm talking about?

ZR: No.

GR: A movie film was put out on a percentage basis. And I would go out and I'd count the number of people that went into the movie theater and they'd settle on that basis to make sure—cause all those Will Roger pictures and the first run pictures. They'd pay like $100 for them and get some percentage of the take.

ZR: Oh, so did the people know who you were or what you were doing?

GR: Yes. I went to Sylva. P. J. Henn over in Sylva and the theater had 365 seats in it and was the first time I had gone out there, I'd check tickets every hour and he'd only

sold 50 tickets at 9 P.M., and I counted the seats and there wasn't an empty seat in the theater. I said, "Mr. Henn, we got a little problem here." He said, "What's that?" I said, "Well you got 365 seats and they're filled but you haven't sold but 50 tickets." He hemmed and hawed a little bit. I says, "You don't have to explain anything, I said I just want to tell you, when I leave here tonight, we settle on the basis of 365 or I take the film with me. If I take the film, you'll never get another first run. By the way, he still runs a theater in Murphy, North Carolina. It's the only privately owned theater in North Carolina.

ZR: So was he letting people in free?

GR: No. He was selling to the C.C.C. boys. He told me, "I'm selling them up there for 10 cents or 15 cents." I said, "I don't give a damn if you're giving them away. But you've gotta settle on that basis." So, we never had any problem after that.

But ah, in addition to that, for the Ross Federal Service, if you wanted to get insurance on your car, I'd check on you, and I'd call up your next door neighbor, go see him, and ask them about your moral character and that kind of stuff. You'd be surprised what they'd tell you. And I did and reservation? And all that kind of stuff. So, I worked two or three jobs. And sometimes, the only time in my life, I didn't have a job for a few months. I worked in a storage garage downtown on College Street at night, stored cars at the Langren Hotel. Two brothers owned that thing, sold tires, washed a lot of cars, or serviced a lot of cars for Swift and Company and other firms, things of that nature. There weren't too many of those. Lot of time only competition we had was down in the Tyler Building, where Bryan had his business, down on Lexington Avenue, that was a storage garage in the Tyler Building. That's what it was built for you see. And this one fellow

that stayed down there, a fellow by the name of Gray. I'd walk to College and Broadway, or he'd walk up the road and we'd talk back and forth at 2:00 in the morning—just to stay awake.

ZR: Do you remember the orange barrels? I've been reading in the newspapers how they had orange barrels in the stores for people to put an extra can of food or whatever in it for people who didn't have it.

GR: Ah, I didn't know what they called them, but I can remember when you put the food in. So back then in '34, I went back to the drug store. My brother [Roy F. Roberts] started practicing medicine then, in '34. And I was in the bonding business before I went back to the drug store. And his first patient—we were in the police station one night—and this black fellow called up on Burton Street from West Asheville and said there's a black that had been cut with a razor and needed a doctor. And ah, the police officer said you got the money to pay for a doctor and he said, yes, sir, we got the money to pay for a doctor. So my brother went out there and sewed him up and got two dollars for sewing him up. That was his first patient. In '34. He'd just come back from setting up his office to practice.

ZR: Which brother was this?

GR: The one, my doctor brother [Roy]. One was a county physician later on. But he made a career in the army.

ZR: What was his first name?

GR: Roy. Yea, he was one of the six boys, he was the second brother. He died here about a year ago [November 2003], in the Baptist nursing home at ninety-four years old. [Roy F. Roberts was born 10/28/1908 and died 11/17/2002. His obituary is filed with

Boulevard, until he went in the nursing home. But he had a varied career. After he retired at Mission, after she died, he said, "I'm going to retire." Well, he did that for about a month. And Dr. Bennett at the V.A. asked him if he'd like to work a couple days a week. And he said, "Na, I'm not interested in that." Dr. Bennett said, "Will you come fulltime. He said, "I'll come full time, if you don't mess with my pension." --"I won't bother with your pension." So he stayed there eleven years. He had an interesting career.

[Talk about ending session and talking again later.]

GR: I've been blessed, I guess, to be in positions that I met a lot of people. I worked for the post office for 37 years, and I knew all the streets, because for 25 of those years I put the mail in, you had to know where the letter went. Three years I carried a rural route. On my rural route I had 87 "Blankenships." Five of them had the first name Frank. That's another story. I had 815 boxes. I started carrying mail at 138 Sandhill Road and ended up on the Biltmore Estate, off Brevard Road. 58 miles.

[End tape.]